

Idylls by veausy

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Summary:

“Will?”

He shook his head like he was trying to get something off it, and smiled again. “Sorry. I get kind of weird when I remember last year. I don’t really talk about it to anyone but my mom, and she just gets really protective and angry.”

“You should get a Mike,” El offered. Didn’t everyone have one?

Idylls

Author's Note:

You guys are just superb. The response to the first installment was amazing. Every single comment lit up a piece of my soul, and I am so grateful for all of your readership!

Anyway, believe me, this is not the end of the fluff.

Will brought *A Wrinkle in Time* to her at the cabin the week before school started, and she finished it the same day. It was the quickest she had ever read anything, and she made a list of only seven words she did not understand. She told Hop about it, who pushed her into his chest and kissed the top of her head, and she told Mike over his intercom, who made Will bike out to her and give her another book.

El sat on a burl in the oak by the driveway, clasping *A Wrinkle in Time* to her chest happily as the sun set slowly over the woods to her left. It was a warm August evening, humid with a kind of heaviness that made her clothes stick to her skin and her skin feel like it was sagging to the ground.

The dinging of a bell in the distance made her blink, eyes rising from the tear in her jeans to land on her friend braking by Hop's car and bringing up a cloud of dust. She grinned and reached for his hand, dragging him behind her through the front door, "Come on, come on!"

"Wha - Jane!" Will laughed, his bike crash-landing loudly on the ground.

Hop watched them run through El's bedroom door and his eyes narrowed as El turned to slam it closed. He barked, "Hey, no funny business!" Will only stuttered as the door swung shut, and then turned wide eyes on El, who regarded at him blankly.

He opened and closed his mouth a few times, making El tilt her head in confusion, until finally he pointed to the book still in the embrace

of El's arms. "So you finished it!"

El held the book up reverently, "Will you tell me where I can get one?"

"Like, another book?" he blinked at her.

"This one."

"You want another one of this book?"

El nodded.

"Oh, El - Jane, you can just keep this one." El hid her amusement at his slip-up. None of her friends seemed capable of using her new name more than once in a conversation. Nonetheless, she was proud of them for the way they kept trying, if only out of respect for her request. "I read it when I was a kid and don't even remember much of the plot anymore. It's all yours."

El looked back at the book in her hands, the first book she'd read that felt good to read, that she understood from cover to cover. She didn't think she'd ever love another book the same. "Thank you," she raised wet eyes to him, and then gently laid the novel in the center of her desk as Will watched her with a wide smile.

"I did bring you another one, if you want it," he started, dropping one arm of his backpack so he could rummage through it. "It's the sequel," he added as he pulled out a sea foam green cover, the corners a little more rumpled and the edges a bit scratched. A loved book.

"The sequel?" El repeated, staring at it.

"Yeah, like a book that was written to follow another one. They're usually about the same characters and the same plot. So, this one would be continuing the story from the first one," he motioned to her desk. "You'd probably like it, but sometimes the first book is the best one."

El snatched the book from his hands. "The sequel," she said again. "Thank you, Will."

“Yeah,” he said airily, dropping down onto her chair. He brushed a hand through his hair. “Are you nervous about school starting?”

El lowered herself to the foot of her bed, watching him carefully. There was a change of tone in the conversation that she sensed but couldn’t fully follow. In a recent conversation with Mike, she’d come to peace with the fact that she might never get fully caught up with the world, but the world was good, and someone would always help her. “Not really,” she said, honestly feeling quite underwhelmed by the start of classes on Monday. “Are you?”

Will shrugged one shoulder, studying the papers on her desk and the bottle of bubble soap that sat atop her dresser. It was small and pink, the screw-off top in the shape of a heart. The rim of the bottle had a soft beige ribbon tied around it. El felt herself warm as she looked at it. “Mike made that for me.”

Will grinned at her, “Yeah?”

“We saw Holly blowing bubbles in the yard, and I thought she had powers,” El blushed, playing with the hem of the blanket beneath her.

“Mike really cares about you,” Will said. “I’m really glad that you have someone like him.”

El nodded, feeling the beginnings of discomfort. For no reason she could understand, Mike got very embarrassed when anyone talked to him about El or talked to El about him, and it made her think she should be uncomfortable, too. “He lets me talk to him about anything.” Will’s mouth did a thing that Mike’s mouth did sometimes, where it quirked and quivered, almost like it wasn’t strong enough to smile. El catalogued his body language. “Will?”

He shook his head like he was trying to get something off it, and smiled again. “Sorry. I get kind of weird when I remember last year. I don’t really talk about it to anyone but my mom, and she just gets really protective and angry.”

“You should get a Mike,” El offered. Didn’t everyone have one?

Will giggled at length. "I should."

El giggled too, a weird bubbling happiness that came out of her in bursts. She'd never giggled before. They went on like that, laughing harder each time they looked at each other.

Finally, they were cut off when Hop opened the door, looming there for a second before nodding his head and pointedly leaving the door wide open as he walked away.

Will whispered, "He doesn't trust anyone."

El nodded grimly, corners of her lips spasming upwards as she regarded Will seriously, and they both started giggling again. She hoped these moments of abject lunacy would last her through high school. Giggling was like letting out extra energy she didn't even realize she was needlessly storing up.

El levitated *A Wind in the Door* to the desk to sit beside its predecessor, and Will sighed and leaned to grab his backpack from the ground. "I should get going. I was at Mike's during lunch while he was making his new campaign, and Mom's gonna be mad if I miss dinner too."

El stood with him, "Wait."

Will turned around.

"Do you have to talk to a Mike?" Will blinked, but she realized on her own that she'd been unclear. "Do people only talk to Mikes?"

Will shook his head. "I think it's more about someone who understands you. Or, more importantly, wants to understand you. Not everyone gets that, even when they're old." Glancing at the open doorway, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "Like Hop. He doesn't have a Mike, you know?"

El thought back to the Snow Ball. "What about Alison Holmes?"

Will made a strange face, looking away, and shrugged with exaggeration. "I - I mean ... I don't, I just -"

“Will.” Rambling. Why did people insist on putting off the inevitable?

Will sighed, “El, it’s a secret. If I tell you a secret, you can’t tell Mike. And I know you don’t keep secrets from Mike.”

El blinked. “Why can’t I tell Mike?”

“Because I don’t want anyone to know.”

“But you were going to tell *me*.”

“Only if you promise you won’t tell Mike.”

El stepped back. She had never kept a secret from Mike, but that was because she thought friends didn’t keep secrets from friends. If Will was keeping a secret from all of them, was Mike doing the same?

Will noticed the look on her face and gently settled a hand on her arm. “El, it’s okay. I just won’t tell you, and you won’t have to hide anything from Mike. Honestly, it’s not important.”

She took a deep breath. “Friends keep secrets?”

Will tilted his head back and forth, a grimace on his face. “Sometimes. I mean, a friend wouldn’t keep a secret that could hurt another friend. Just stuff that ... stuff that’s really private, sometimes friends don’t want to tell anyone. It doesn’t make you a bad friend.”

El took another breath. “Tell me.”

Will’s eyes narrowed.

She added, “I won’t tell Mike. Promise.”

Will looked at the open door again and used his hold on El’s arm to drag her to the wall furthest from it. He leaned in, close to her ear, and whispered four words she did not understand and would not for a long time: “I think I’m gay.”

—

Mike’s hand was clammy.

His fingers were long and bony, wrapped loosely around El's, but he seemed to have extensive energy these days, which expressed itself through jerky movements, long bike rides, or - like now - hands that were clammy.

He'd met her at the end of Hop's driveway that morning, where she'd waited for him with her brand new backpack slung tight over her shoulders and heavy with books. From there, they'd biked to Will's, and then met Lucas, Max, and Dustin at a corner several blocks from the public library.

The wind had been cool and calming on her face, the leaves they'd sped by blurring redyellowgreen to her eyes. Dustin whooped as they went down a slope, and Max put her feet on the center caps of Lucas's back wheel and stood, one hand on his shoulder and the other in the air above her, face blissfully turned to the sky as her hair billowed out behind her. El hadn't had the will to remove her arms from around Mike's warm body to try to do the same.

As the boys had all parked their bikes, Mike looked at her and laughed, hand reaching for her hair nervously. Max roared her laughter from behind Lucas, brushing nimble hands through her own red strands.

"Is it okay?" Mike asked, softly brushing El's hair down. She nodded and wondered what it had looked like before.

Finally, Max leaned over and used one finger to flick a short lock down into El's face. "There, now she's badass." Mike rolled his eyes, moving the strand over her ear carefully, and took El's hand as he led the group to the main doors.

El's eyes felt like they weren't landing on anything as they flitted around the front of the building, taking in the variously-sized swarms of children. She was one of them now.

A few students cast looks at her and the group, her in particular because she was new, and she clasped Mike's hand harder, her steps landing closer to his as she tried to hide perhaps behind, perhaps within him. It took her a moment to notice that his arm turned rigid, stretched out from his body to distance himself from her. She looked

up at him.

His face was red and his eyes were glued to the ground, and his pace seemed brisk now when it had been so leisurely at first.

“Are you okay?” El asked quietly, forgetting the students around them. Max and Will were laughing a few steps behind, and it felt so strange not to be sharing their happiness as she watched Mike nod quickly.

“I just think we should maybe not hold hands at school,” Mike said, loosening his fingers from around hers. El watched their hands swing apart.

“How come?”

“It’s like begging for everyone’s attention,” he muttered, throwing a dark look at a group of boys standing near the wall and doing what seemed to be jeering.

They reached a tight crowd near the doors and Mike walked forward through it, disappearing into the building quickly. Max appeared beside El then, looping her arm around El’s elbow and still singing, “Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.”

Will put a hand on El’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, El. He’s trying to protect you both.”

El frowned. “From what?”

Will exchanged a look with Dustin and Lucas and sighed, “Listen, Troy and those guys ... they can turn any good thing into a total nightmare.”

—

“Mister Sinclair, is it something you would like to share with the entire class?”

El looked up from her notebook, finding the back of Lucas’s head near the front of the class. He ducked down, muttering, “No, ma’am,” as Max laughed silently in the seat behind him.

Mrs. Petersen turned back to the board after giving Lucas a disapproving once-over, and Max caught El's eye, lifting a small feather she'd been using to tickle Lucas and make him squirm around whispering for her to stop. El grinned and looked back at her notebook.

There were thirty-seven students in this English class, and not one of them was Mike. The first day, she'd found out from Will that she probably wouldn't see Mike at all, since he was in advanced science and math classes, and English and social studies were general required courses, so there would be at least three sections of students for each one. Now, she only saw him at lunch.

From her seat near the windows, El glanced at the changing leaves outside. The trees were colorful, and even prettier from up close. The last time she'd seen this season, she'd been locked in at Hopper's cabin, and the trees had seemed like far-off mirages more than anything she could ever touch.

"Hey, Jane?"

El turned. Jesse, the boy who sat in the seat next to her, was looking at her expectantly, a tentative smile on his face.

El looked around. All the students were speaking to each other, low murmurs filling the room as Mrs. Petersen walked to her desk and sat down. Jesse was still looking at her, his grin less sure. "Did you want to work together on the project?"

El paused. "Project?"

"Yeah, the one Mrs. Petersen just talked about?"

"Oh," El blinked, looked at the front of the room, where Max and Lucas were already deep in discussion, and there was nothing on the board. Will, who sat next to Jake Levin, was bright red and laughing at something Jake was saying. El made a note to ask him about that later. "Sure."

"Great," Jesse said, smile brightening again. "Do you want to work on it tonight at my house?"

El blinked again. Why couldn't they just work at the library?

"I mean, I just think I already have some of the supplies we'd need for the poster. Or do you want to do your place?"

Hopper would never agree to that. "Your ... place," she finally acquiesced, feeling strangely about it. She'd been to all her friends' houses, but how would she go alone to Jesse's? Could she bring Mike?

The bell rang a few minutes later, and Jesse stood to leave with a quick smile at her, "See you tonight, Jane."

When she, Lucas, Max, and Will made their way out of the room, Mike and Dustin stood leaning against the lockers outside as they always did. Max was finishing her warning, "You'd better be careful, El, girls in that class are going to be vicious," as Mike fell in line with them on their way to the cafeteria.

"How come?" El asked, feeling like it was her default phrase nowadays.

"Well, 'cause it's Jesse," Max snorted, looking at Lucas for support. He shrugged.

Mike asked, "Jesse Hart?" as Dustin added, "What about him?"

Max singsonged, "El's doing a group project with him at his *house* tonight." Her eyes were trained on Mike hostilely. "We were assigned partners."

Mike nodded slowly, staring ahead of them as they all continued to walk, now in a strange silence. El finally squeaked, "Is that bad?"

Will spoke quickly, "No, of course not. It's a school assignment, it would be irresponsible if you didn't do the work."

"Is Jesse ... bad?"

Max snorted again, but Lucas elbowed her, and she kept quiet. Dustin spoke instead, "No, El, he's great, he's just kind of ... popular?"

Lucas nodded, "Yeah, tend to girls like him a lot -"

"He's kind of known for going out with a lot of -"

"He has a *reputation*, let's say -"

"Look, he's a year older, so of course he's gonna -"

Mike snorted, "It figures Jesse Hart's in a freshman English class."

Max thumped him on the back of the head with her pencil bag, aiming a glare at him when he turned around angrily. "He's a nice guy, lover boy. And you really shouldn't expect Jane to be invisible here. It's not like he's the first guy."

Mike turned betrayed eyes on El, who felt completely out of the loop now and guilty of something unknown. "What?"

Max spoke for her, "When you were late to lunch last week, Lewis Francis offered her his sandwich when they ran out of them in the line. And Joey from homeroom has already asked her to sit at their table."

El didn't understand what was wrong with anything Max was saying, but Mike looked upset and she had no idea how to fix it. She wanted Max to stop talking.

Will added, "Oh, wasn't Rustin having a party last weekend that he invited El -"

"Okay!" Mike shouted, arms flying out to the sides. "I get it."

"Oh, don't be a dick," Max intoned as they rounded the corner to the cafeteria doors. "El has nothing to do with it."

El felt, very privately and very strongly, that she really didn't. Something had just happened, and she didn't know what, and she hated what it had done to her friends. Everyone seemed uncomfortable now, and standing in the lunch line together wasn't fun like it had always been. On their own, the words exchanged by everyone as they were walking shouldn't have caused this, but she didn't know what *had*.

“Mike,” she asked him quietly, when the others had started a conversation about the relative value of grape juice in comparison with chocolate milk, “should I not go to Jesse’s house?”

He looked at her intensely, like he was trying to find something in her eyes, but she knew he was actually just looking inside himself. “No, El,” he finally said, twisting his mouth into a very quick smile. “You should go, and you should get a really good grade on that project.”

“Then why -“

“The stuff we were saying is just ...” he sighed, looking at their friends and then back at her. “I don’t like Jesse very much, that’s all.”

“How come?”

Mike blushed. “There’s no good reason, really. But that happens sometimes. You shouldn’t let it stop you from getting to know him or being his friend.” He looked at their friends again and blushed harder, purposefully looking toward the front of the lunch line and turning away. When El followed his gaze, she found Max wearing a delighted, exaggerated smile, holding two thumbs up.

—

“Oh, my god!” Max screeched, pulling her shirt down and jumping off the desk, letting her hair fall forward to hide her face from El.

Lucas made a growling noise in his throat, slamming his hand on a table and pacing toward the whiteboard.

El stood in the door, frozen and watching.

“Close the fucking door!” Max screeched again, righting her shirt over her shoulders and doing something to the clasp on her bra, arms contorted behind her in what looked like a painful move.

El stepped in, letting the door shut quietly behind her. Alarmed by their reactions, El was nonetheless not uncomfortable, and mostly just curious about what she’d walked in on. Nearly the entire school had emptied out while El had waited for Mike, Will, and Dustin to

finish up in the A.V. room. She'd left them at the bike rack to grab the textbook she'd left in Mrs. Petersen's class, only to find the door locked and Lucas and Max kissing on one of the desks.

"How the hell did you get the door open, anyway?" Max said, huffily.

"I used my powers," El answered with a shrug. It was one of the easiest things to use her powers on.

Lucas finally paced back to where Max was sliding back onto the desk she'd previously been seated on, but refused to make eye contact with El. "Shouldn't you be at A.V. with everyone else?"

"They finished. I forgot my book." Remembering why she was there, El began to walk along the wall to the window, where a slight dip in the sill allowed her to set things against the glass and have them not fall out onto the floor during class. Carefully extricating the brand new hard cover that she and Hopper had bought together, El turned back to her friends. "What were you doing?"

Lucas made a muffled screaming sound again and covered his face with his hands. Max, while a bit redder than usual, just laughed and pushed him toward the door. "Go, I'll be right out."

He shook his head all the way to the door, paused with his hand on the handle, looked back at El and shook his head some more, and then exited. The door shut behind him quietly, and Max slipped back to the floor quickly, sitting El down in front of her. "Please don't tell anyone."

El frowned. "Tell what?"

"What you just saw us doing."

"I don't know what I saw you doing."

Max blinked. "Wait, okay, what?"

"Did Lucas have his hand on your - your chest?" El asked tentatively. She knew there were other words that people tended to use, but the context and the need for those words was wholly unclear.

Max looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, you poor thing." She looked back at El and studied her for a second before saying, "Oh, you poor, poor thing. Even Wheeler can't be this stupid, can he?"

El watched her, bewildered.

"Okay, do you know what sex is?"

"Sexual intercourse," El began, "it's a reproductive process that -"

"Okay, so you don't," Max cut her off. "Sex is something two people do when they're dating, like me and Lucas, or you and Mike."

"But we -"

"Right, okay, just listen. When two people like each other, the way you and Mike do, they have sex. You know how you and Mike kiss?"

El nodded. They kissed all the time now, when they were at home. Mike still didn't hold her hand at school or tell anyone she was his girlfriend and that he was her boyfriend. It didn't bother her, the way Max told her it should, but she also didn't really understand his reasons, the way Will made it seem like she should.

"Okay, well let's compare that to something you've done before. You know how in math, first you do addition and subtraction, and then when it's more complicated, you do multiplication and division? And then when it's super advanced, you do, like, geometry and equations and stuff? Like, there's levels." When Max looked at her, El nodded again. "Okay, so kissing is like the addition of dating. There's a bunch of other levels of stuff you and Mike will eventually do. And sex is pretty much like equations."

"What other stuff?"

"It depends on what you and Mike want, honestly. I feel like he should have talked to you about this, since he's claimed you for, like, two years now."

"Claimed?"

"Okay, ignore that. Basically, the stuff people do in private is really

specific to the people. Nancy and Jonathan might do stuff Lucas and I won't do, or the other way around. But sex is pretty universal."

"What were you doing?"

"It's called second base. You touch each other."

"Why?"

Max had a look on her face like El had just told her she would never be able to leave the cabin again. "Oh, god. Because it feels good, El. I can't fucking believe Wheeler."

"Why?"

"Because he should be communicating with you! This is stuff you're going to see in high school, and I'm kind of blown away that you haven't seen it already."

El shifted in her seat, fingers playing with the sharp corner of the cover of her book, thinking back on the last few months. "I saw Nancy and Jonathan this summer, at Will's house."

Max raised her eyebrows expectantly, looking gleeful. "Yeah?"

"She was sitting on the bathroom sink, and he was on the floor with her legs on his -"

"Whoa-kay!" Max made a cutting motion at her throat, and then mimed gagging. "That's enough."

"That's ... sex?"

Max considered this. "It's a form of it, yeah. It's probably closer to third base, but that's still essentially sex. Basically, he was making her feel good."

"And Mike and I should be doing it?"

"No," Max shook her head, "that's not what I'm saying. Please don't tell him I said that, because I *didn't*." When El just blinked at her, she went on, "I just think you need to talk to him about it. It can be

uncomfortable and scary, and that's why people avoid it and it ends up blowing up on them. I guarantee when you try to talk to him about it, Wheeler's gonna freak. He treats you like you're made of china, which - I get it, okay? But the nature of his relationship with you should make him feel a lot more confident about some stuff. I think he's still waiting for the day the other shoe's gonna drop."

"The other shoe?"

Max lifted El out of her seat and led her through the door, their footsteps echoing in the empty hallways, looking gray and sad now with the obvious lack of students. "I think he fully expects that one of these days you're just going to dump him."

El started. How could Mike even think that? "Why does Mike think -"

"See," Max spoke over her, slamming open the front doors and leading El to the bike racks where the boys were all still waiting. "That's why you two need to talk more."

—

"How about you and your faggot boyfriend get out of our faces before this all goes south?"

El turned the corner of the outside of the math wing, leaves crunching underfoot as she looked for Mike, who left with Will to make a call home during lunch. He'd been gone for half an hour when El started to get worried, and Max told her to "just go find your guy, lover girl," and so she'd gone.

Around the corner, she found a small empty lot near the trees that lined the campus, and Mike and Will were standing across from four other boys, who were advancing on them menacingly.

Mike rolled his eyes, "Aren't you ever going to get tired of that one, Troy?"

The goonies laughed, and one of them turned to Troy, "It speaks!"

Will murmured something to Mike, and Troy shoved him, "Don't turn this intimate, faggot, share with the class!"

El's eyes narrowed.

"Seriously, haven't we outgrown this?" Mike said, voice betraying the reasonableness of his words. "Can't you just move on?"

"Nope," Troy said, circling him now, his eyes running over Mike's taller form distastefully.

"Grow *up*," Mike pleaded, backing up in front of Will to put himself between him and the bullies.

Troy's hands landed on Mike's chest as he shoved him backwards, making him trip and slam into Will, taking them both to the muddy ground. Within a second, his wrist folded backwards and he howled in pain, grabbing at it futilely.

El walked toward them slowly, nose bleeding as she watched the others.

"What's going on? Troy?" one of his friend said, confused, but he kicked Mike out of the way as he checked on Troy, so El sent him sprawling in a puddle, nose breaking against the ground.

"Is one of you faggots doing this?" another one demanded, and El was just plain tired of hearing that word, so she jerked her head down and with it came his pants, pooling around his ankles. By the time she reached Mike and Will, her nose had a steady stream of blood coming from it, and the bullies had all cleared out of the lot, running to the back of the school with angry shouts.

"El?" Mike laughed, sounding out of breath and relieved. "Did you do all that?"

She nodded.

"You've gotta stop doing that," he said as he stood and helped Will up. "It gives you nosebleeds and takes all your energy."

"Not really," she shrugged, wiping at her nose with her sleeve. "I practice every night now."

Mike's eyes widened. "Really?"

“Hop told me the powers are useless if I can’t control them. So he lets me do small stuff around the cabin. Most stuff doesn’t make my nose bleed anymore.”

Will looked amazed. “That’s so cool, El!”

“Thanks,” El said, and used her powers to fix his hair, gently lowering a few stray strands back into place. He giggled, raising his hand to his hair and running from her playfully.

From the front doors, they heard Lucas call Will’s name and wave at him agitatedly. He nodded to Mike and El and jogged away.

El put her hand in Mike’s and stopped him in their ascent up the stairs. One of her hands rose to fix his hair as well, and he took it afterwards, kissing her knuckles.

“Did you get to call home?”

Mike nodded. They looked into each other’s eyes quietly, both shivering in the cool October breeze without their jackets.

“Everything okay?” she followed up, even quieter. Again, he nodded. It felt like the wind was carrying her words away before they even came out of her mouth, wrapping the two of them up in a little bubble of their own. The entire campus was empty, all the students stuffed into the cafeteria for the rest of the lunch hour, and El found the confidence to pull herself into Mike’s chest, sticking her face in the soft cloth of his sweater, warm from his chest.

After a while, they began to make their way inside again, the air between them charged in a new way and changed.

“What is ... ‘faggot’?”

Mike’s lips twisted. “It’s a mean word people use for people who are gay.”

El remembered her conversation with Will, alert suddenly and angry at the bullies. She didn’t know whether to ask, whether it would be like keeping a secret from Mike, but in the end her curiosity won out. “Gay?”

“That’s when you like people of the same gender. Like Will does.”

El raised wide eyes to Mike’s face. Will really was underestimating his friends. But, El thought as she contemplated it on the whole, at least when he felt safe enough and confident enough to talk about it, he would find nothing but support waiting for him. Mike loved Will, so much; of course he had known all along. “Like ... the way I like you?”

Mike blushed and smiled at her. “And the way I like you.”

I love you, she thought again, completely unbidden. But they were approaching the doors now, and any second someone would see them. It wasn’t the time, especially as Mike dropped her hand again before opening the door for her.

“The boys are downstairs, dear,” Karen said as she led El to the basement door, lifting her hand to the side of her mouth and leaning toward the stairs as she added, “and being *loud*.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler,” El said, watching the woman saunter back into the living room, silky bathrobe fluttering behind her. She wondered if Karen knew that she was Mike’s girlfriend.

The door was already cracked open, and El swung it further quietly. At the top of the stairs, she heard Mike speak.

“... why I probably would take it slow. I mean, we’re only fifteen. Plus, you don’t know him very well.”

Still out of El’s view, Will hummed his accord. El began to walk down the steps, but neither boy seemed to notice her. “I guess I’m scared, too. Jake seems nice, but who’s to say he won’t - you know - ?”

“Jocks are dicks,” Mike nodded. “I mean, any advice I give you is going to stem from my limited experience with El, so keep that in mind, too.”

“I think both she and Hop appreciate that you’re taking everything slow,” Will giggled. “Hop thinks half of us are trying to get into her

pants, anyway.”

“He does?” Mike exclaimed, slapping a hand onto the D & D table. “Are you serious?”

“He’s told both me and Lucas to keep her bedroom door open at least once.”

Mike shook his head, letting an amused breath out through his teeth. “Hop’s great.”

Will nodded, and there was a comfortable silence for a bit. As El opened her mouth to announce herself, Will went on, “Jake’s dad seems like he knows. I just had a feeling, I don’t know. But he’s definitely not going to be open about it at school, which is what kind of makes me tense. It could turn so bad.”

Mike nodded sympathetically. “Take it as slow as you need, Will. Stop whenever you’re uncomfortable. And never do something that you have a bad feeling about.”

“Is this from your experience, too?” Will asked with wide eyes.

Mike snorted. “No, but - I try to see it from her eyes, you know? She doesn’t *get it*. Like, half the time, she does stuff just because people imply that it’s normal, but that’s such a trusting thing to do. People could lie to her all the time, and it makes me so mad that she’s not going to know for sure, not for *years*.”

“But, so, are you never going to tell her about stuff?”

“No, I -” Mike cut himself off, running a hand through his hair agitatedly. “I don’t know. It feels unfair to bring it up when she’s not asking about it, you know. Like I’m forcing stuff on her.”

“But, Mike, I think you think you’re on the same wavelength when you’re really not. She definitely doesn’t understand why you act different at school, and I don’t think she ever understood why you hate Jesse Hart. She just avoids him by default now, ‘cause she doesn’t want to make you mad.”

“I know,” Mike said into his hands, which were now plastered flat to

his face and muffling his voice. "I want to make it easy, but making it easy means actually *talking* about stuff, which means bringing up the stuff in the first place."

"You can wait for her to bring it up first, that's fair," Will offered reasonably. "But then she might never bring it up. Because she isn't supposed to learn about that stuff from someone else, she's supposed to learn it from *you*. And I don't think she'd ever believe you wanted the worst for her. You walk on water in her eyes."

Mike had powers? El really wanted to interrupt the conversation, but she knew they were talking about her, and she didn't want to make them uncomfortable. She hovered on the fifth step, holding the wooden railing tightly.

"You're right. You're right."

"You should talk to her, and really soon."

"Yeah," Mike groaned into his hands.

"Like right now, since she's currently standing on the stairs," Will pointed, smirking at her. El's jaw dropped.

Mike's hand fell from his face, banging into the table loudly, as he swiveled in his seat to stare up at her, "Oh my God, El!"

—

"Holly, can you *please* just go back to your room," Mike hollered, listening for the sound of his sister leaving. She yelled back, "I hate you!" before slamming the basement door shut.

When Mike turned back to El, her face was stretched in a wide smile, and she patted the seat cushion beside her on the couch. "You're tense."

Mike gave her a playful look and climbed into the blanket fort instead. They'd had to expand it over the previous spring to accommodate both of their growing bodies, and it now stretched along the better half of the wall, put together from mismatched, mangled sheets and blankets Mike had managed to smuggle from

somewhere inside the house.

He landed on a large pile of pillows and patted the empty space next to him, raising an eyebrow to her in challenge.

El shrugged, willing to lose this round, and clambered to join him in the warmth and safety of their fort. “You drive a hard bargain.”

Mike blinked at her. “Where did you learn that phrase?”

El hesitated. But this wasn’t a secret she could keep from Mike, nor a secret she felt she *should* keep. “Jesse Hart said it.”

Mike’s face shuttered, and he changed his relaxed slouch against the wall to a tense one as he leaned forward over his folded legs. “Jesse Hart.”

“I’m sorry, “ El offered quickly. It didn’t feel like the right sentiment, but she felt sorry for bringing up someone Mike disliked.

Mike shook his head, rubbing his forehead with two fingers and closing his eyes. “No, El, you shouldn’t be sorry. I’m sorry I’m such a baby about this.”

El waited for him to explain, but when he wouldn’t, she laid her hand gently on his knee. “Mike?”

“Basically,” he exploded, lifting his face and raising his hands into the air between them, “I’m super jealous.”

El was familiar with the word, having heard Lucas and Max argue over various girls and boys that each of them had at one point talked to, but she’d never pictured the word could fit her or Mike. It seemed like something for others, like sex, and holding hands at school, and fighting.

“How come?”

Mike looked at a loss for words, gesticulating brokenly but never following it up. Finally, he sighed, “Jesse’s a cool guy, and he likes you, and you like him, and I’m trying to put off for as long as possible the day when you realize you’re too cool for me. That’s how come.”

El frowned, putting her other hand on Mike's other knee and moving so she sat right in front of him. "I am too cool for you."

He jerked up to look at her, shocked until he saw the smile on her face, and he huffed his amusement into his hand, studying the wool blanket beneath them carefully. "Yeah, well, maybe this is where it ends." After a second, he scrunched his face up and shook his head. "No, sorry, that was super dramatic. El, I like you a lot. And it really sucks to imagine, even for a second, a day when you don't like me anymore."

"That won't happen."

Mike met her eyes, finally, and let them look at each other at length. El tried to communicate as much of what she felt as she could through her eyes, but she knew there would always be words she could not say, thoughts she could not share. And yet, unexpectedly, Mike nodded almost imperceptibly, his hand slowly falling from his face and wrapping around one of her own. "I believe you."

El leaned forward, kissing him. "Promise?"

Mike smiled against her mouth. "Promise."

El leaned back, satisfied. "Is that why you wouldn't hold my hand?"

Mike's face fell, and he looked like her words hurt him. "No, I just ... El, remember when Troy was being a jerk during lunch?" She nodded. "He's the worst of them, but he's not the only one. Kids love to tease and say stuff, at this school. Kids are mean. And I've seen it, and I know it, and I can deal with it, like I've dealt with it for the last nine years. But you don't know what it's like. And it would be really unfair for me to expose you to it just because I want to hold your hand and kiss you."

El's eyes roved over Mike's face, taking in the earnest look in his eyes, the sad downturn of his lips, the freckles she loved so much. "I understand."

Mike let out a breath. "I'm so glad, El, you know I'd never -"

"But," she cut him off, "I can defend myself. My powers aren't all that

I have.”

Mike looked surprised.

“I want to hold your hand and kiss you. And you want to hold my hand and kiss me.”

He nodded, confused.

“So you should let us do it.”

Mike’s eyes dropped to her hand between his fingers, and his head ducked down, chastened. “Okay.”

“Mike,” El urged, extracting her hands and placing them on his cheeks, lifting him up to meet her eyes. He looked a bit pink all over, but his eyes were fixed on her mouth, like he also knew there was only one thing that followed when she said his name like that. El kissed him.

His now-unoccupied hands rose up her back, sliding slowly until they tangled in her hair and manipulated her body until she was chest-to-chest with him, her arms wrapped tight around his neck. Their kisses turned hot quickly, the sounds of them echoing in the small space they’d carved out for themselves among these blankets, and before long, El was gasping in between kisses, her whole face hot and her body writhing as she tried to get even closer.

At first, Mike was simply breaking away for small pauses, but then El noticed him chuckling into her mouth, the sound swallowed up almost instantly, and finally he bent his neck back, laughing up at the ceiling of their fort, “El, El!”

She breathed heavily, waiting, lips pulsing and swollen.

“You’re taking my clothes off,” he managed to say through laughter, making El jerk back and look at him.

His sweater was unbuttoned and pushed back over his shoulders, hanging on him only by the sleeves, and the gray henley underneath - her favorite - was pulled up to his neck, exposing most of his chest and stomach.

El dropped her face into her hands, channeling her powers purposefully now to put Mike's clothes back where they should be, and he grabbed her wrists, trying to pull her hands off her face, still chuckling. "El, come on, it's okay."

"I've never accidentally used my powers," El said quietly, letting Mike pull her wrists down.

He processed this and grinned. "Honestly, I'm flattered."

El looked at his lips, red and swollen like she imagined hers were, and suddenly remembered to ask, "Is it okay that I - ?"

Mike nodded, "Don't worry about it." After another second he added, "Unless you don't want us to - ?"

El shook her head, climbing forward on her knees until she was poised between Mike's legs. "No, I want to."

Mike studied her carefully. "You want to do what?"

El thought back to her conversation with Max, the things she saw Nancy doing, the way she felt about Mike. She shrugged. "Everything."

Mike flushed red. "Wait, what? No, you don't."

El nodded, matter-of-fact. "I do. Max told me -"

Mike growled deep in his throat and fell back on the pillows, raising one to lay it flat on his face. El giggled, climbing forward and lying between his splayed legs to wrap her arms around him. He growled again into the pillow, muffled now, and barked into the cloth, "I swear I'm going to kill her."